

The Hon. John Brumby, MLA, Premier of Victoria  
The Parliament of Victoria  
1 Treasury Place  
Victoria 3000

6 August 2007

Dear Premier,

I write regarding the proposed desalination plant and the north-south pipeline. At this stage, you have no democratic mandate to proceed with these proposals. I urge you, therefore, to hold a referendum to allow Victorians to decide whether they are the most appropriate means of securing Melbourne's future water supply.

The idea of a desalination plant was first raised last year by the Leader of the Opposition, Mr Ted Baillieu, at which time it was vigorously rejected by the Bracks government. On the day that the Victorian Labor Party launched its November 2006 election campaign, the then premier described the desalination idea as a 'hoax'. He stated that the energy generation required for desalination is 'enormous', and that the 'intrusion on the community is enormous, and, of course, it is extraordinarily expensive'. He argued, instead, that water recycling and water conservation measures would be sufficient to achieve water security for Melbourne.

At the time of the November election, your government did not take any policy initiatives regarding these infrastructure projects to the people of Victoria. Yet, in less than a year, and with the next election more than three years away, your government now proposes these massive infrastructure projects. This has occurred without any public consultation, without the opportunity for public debate, without an examination of environmental effects or assessment of health and water quality issues, and without proper scrutiny from an independent authority on the costs and benefits of the schemes or the financial arrangements for them.

What is the background against which you propose to implement these infrastructure projects? We are at a critical juncture with respect to water use, water management and achieving our future water security. We are an affluent, high water-use country, with the largest domestic water footprint of any nation on Earth. We let many opportunities to conserve water go begging. The volume of urban stormwater runoff from our cities in an average year, for instance, is only slightly less than the total volume of water consumed by households. And, every day, millions of litres of water that could be recycled are carried away from homes, businesses, factories and farms and simply discharged into the sea. Our industries are not yet required to even audit their water use. We have not adequately invested, either, in our irrigation industries to overcome significant water-loss problems or to achieve other water efficiencies. Nor have we invested sufficiently in the repair and maintenance of our seriously degraded freshwater ecosystems.

Our current problems with water can be turned around by embracing efficiency across all sectors of the Victorian community – in our households, industries and on our farms. Irrespective of the future impacts of climate change upon our water resources, our best chance of achieving a sustainable water future lies with us becoming super-efficient water users living within our existing water means.

Rather than addressing current problems with our water use and management, it is likely that the proposed desalination plant and north-south pipeline will compound them. They will feed, and probably even enlarge, our city's already rapacious appetite for water. By encouraging an 'easy come, easy go' mentality it will become far harder to convince Melburnians of the need to make substantial water savings across all households, and to accept that the water restrictions of the past year or so are only the beginning of the changes we should make.

By artificially boosting supply, it will become much harder for government to impose mandatory water auditing on businesses. The massive investment of close to \$5 billion will also make it difficult to fund widespread programs aimed at achieving water efficiency in our homes, workplaces and on our farms. The ensuing anger and bitterness in rural Victoria at seeing proposals that satisfy high water user habits in the city will not go away. Victorians are now receiving contradictory and socially divisive messages about water. While farmers (and irrigators, in particular) are being urged to become more efficient in their use of water, you, as the newly installed premier, last week spoke in terms of 'water flowing into the city'. Differential treatment of this kind would make it harder for Victorians, rural and urban, to come together to find solutions to ensure our long-term water security.

There is a lot at stake here. These proposals are more than large-scale engineering schemes with big price tags. They represent a critical turning point, with huge implications for the way we use and manage our precious water resources into the future. There are real, tangible alternatives to these proposals. The amount of capital required to construct the desalination plant and the pipeline, for instance, would fund the retrofitting of every Melbourne household with water-efficient technology, with change left over.

Victorians should be able to debate these important questions. After all, water belongs to the people, not to governments. I note that the last referendum held in Victoria was on the subject of the extension to hotel trading hours. I put it to you, premier, that the question of securing Victoria's water future is as important an issue for democratic engagement, if not more so, as hostelry drinking hours.

I urge you to consider putting the current proposals on hold while you take the bold, decisive and inclusive step of letting Victorians have a say on the options regarding their water future.

It is my intention to publicize this request over the next several weeks so that other Victorians have an opportunity to engage constructively on the matter as well.

Sincerely,

Mary Crooks  
Project Director Watermark Australia Project  
Co-author of *Our Water Mark*